

Star Trek is Paramount's; A. Decker built Star Traks; mind controlling rays from secret military satellites made M. Meneks create BorgSpace
- I'm not paranoid, it's just that they ARE out to get me

In-Laws of Relativity

Cube #347 had been lurking at the edges of a vast nebula for several weeks, hoping for a further hint as to the whereabouts of species #8511, but none had been forthcoming. Supplies were not critical, and a cube could survive for years scavenging raw materials, but Delta was clamoring to stockpile the high tensile ceramometallic alloys and complex mechanical parts which were of greater quality when manufactured in a factory complex dedicated to the task. As the nebula in question was at the far border of Borg-claimed space, a run to the nearest supply depot would entail nearly a month travel time to leave and return; that month was a time better spent casting for clues. On the other hand, after the humiliating drubbing Cube #347 had taken recently, a short break for preparation and mental regrouping might be in order.

Captain laid out the alternatives along with pros and cons of each to the sub-collective. While he personally pulled for staying (if only to hope his captaincy might be cut short with a lucky break), it was not to be, with the overwhelming consensus to head to the supply depot. Captain initiated a limited link with the Greater Consciousness, relaying both the request to postpone temporarily the task of finding the home system of species #8511 and to send a list of requested supplies. Permission granted.

Thinking of the closer than normal contact with the Collective to occur in several weeks, Captain began the careful process to sequester memories of his precious contraband viewscreen. Later he would physically dismantle and hide the thing.

Supplies were gained: theoretically Delta had pilfered enough to her cache to allow five Cycles of autonomous operation, assuming nothing untoward happened. Of course, reality would probably be realized when the supplies were accidentally jettisoned sometime in the near future. The trek back to the nebula's outskirts was anticipated to be as boring as the journey to the depot; expectation became actuality.

Six days into the two week trip, the engineering hierarchy had set up a game of "Capture-The-Flag" which involved complex rules of creating (non-dangerous) failures about the cube, then sending teams to find, diagnose, and repair the fault within a time limit. It didn't always work, especially on the more ingenious and improbable problems, as the setting partition occasionally leaked solutions, but it did involve much use of transporters (when they weren't "disabled") and clanking about. As it did actually serve a purpose, Captain couldn't come up with any reason to halt the activities, although he did specifically ban any playing in the nodal intersection he frequented. Meanwhile, the rest of the sub-collective found their own ways to pass the time.

When a passive sensor outpost approximately three light years from Cube #347's current position began to transmit the trespassing of a small convoy of ships, overwhelming consensus was to take a closer look. No dispute from the Greater Consciousness, because no other cubes were within two hundred light years, allowed the sub-collective to gleefully delay the tedious assignment of searching for species #8511, at least for another cycle or two.

Captain altered course, then went back to the task he had been tinkering on for the last several cycles - hanging and repairing his viewscreen. Before he had issued his order for the

Capture-The-Flag game to stay away from his area, a team had stepped on the hidden screen in their zeal to discover a simulated conduit leak. Declaring he did not want the dubious help of Delta's hierarchy, Captain had begun repairs on his own. In reality, the task was more to alleviate his own boredom than any actual annoyance.

The proximity alert klaxon sounded as Captain was maneuvering a cable into place behind the screen in preparation to soldering it into place. Opposite in the nodal intersection, 183 of 240 was performing actual routine maintenance of replacing old optic cabling within the bulkhead. Pausing in the squeeze to peer between wall and back of viewscreen, confirming wires had been laid correctly, Captain sank more fully into the net to read the synopsis of the trespasser's statistics.

The convoy was twenty-one ships of various sizes and armaments, belonging to species #2553. That particular species had been fully assimilated into the Collective twenty-five Cycles prior, except for a few roving bands of fugitives. Drones of the species were generally useful for manual labor on desertified worlds, with a few individuals excellent codifier/initiators of consensus. Resistance index was low. The capture and assimilation of the convoy members, while not a priority, would be welcome; new subjects were required for experiments as the species had been found to be difficult to either clone or be artificially reproduced via creche wombs.

Feeling in the nets, Captain distractedly began the process of capture. Following protocol exactly (or as close as possible), the cube would charge in, inform the ships of their imminent assimilation, then attempt to tractor as many of the convoy as possible before they began their anticipated scatter. With luck three, or even four, of the targets would be caught and processed, the occupants put into stasis until another cube could meet with Cube #347. Or at least that was the plan.

As Cube #347 powered in to deliver the ultimatum, Captain completed his soldering. A few cuts and burns were ignored as flesh healed within seconds of being injured. Elsewhere, Weapons managed to seize four ships (species #2553 had never learned the secret of modulating their shield harmonics), cursing as the others slipped away. A torpedo volley knocked a fifth into a limping impulse, but the rest leaped into warp.

Captain pushed himself away from the screen, standing from the uncomfortable kneeling position he had been in. Still multitasking, he triggered video and audio to inform the ships of the futility of their resistance, not that much was happening other than an ineffective phaser or two splashing on the shields. Meanwhile, 183 of 240 was standing oddly, peering at the walls above the viewscreen. Captain ignored the drone, turning to regard his project...all done! A few mental commands brought the screen to life. He routed the visual signal which was being received from the lead ship...the doomed always had their protests to give.

{Captain?} said 183 of 240.

"What is it?" replied Captain verbally, more interested in feeling smug over the fact he had once more thwarted the odds of retaining his prize viewscreen. The representative of species #2553, most likely a captain or convoy leader, was silently watching his end of the feed, which was a confounding maze of walkways, machinery, and alcoves. It was obvious it was digesting the fact of its pending career change. On the audio band, the Borg promise of assimilation was voiced.

{Captain?}

"Go on."

{The visual feed to the ship of #2553 isn't originating from one of the usual cameras.}

"It isn't?" Captain asked with puzzlement. He traced the feed, following the electrical impulses through the system to...his nodal intersection. The camera directly ahead and above, to be exact. The being on the other end, and all the other ships receiving the same message, were seeing him, Captain. Oh-oh...major screw up. 183 of 240 nonchalantly inched sideways, taking that part of himself which was on screen totally out of view; Captain did not have that option. Blank as to what to do, the species #2553 reacted first, a look of amazement on its face,

"Gerson, is that you? Is that really you? You've got to remember me, son...this is Breth, your father."

Speechless, Captain could only stare. Breth was a typical member of species #2553. Of normal bipedal stance with two upper manipulatory limbs, small hairy feathers of blue cascaded down head and along side of neck, except for a circular area on top where green was the predominant color. Eyes of piercing gray stared from a smoothly black face, while lipless mouth hung slightly open to reveal the tips of lethally sharp teeth. A bump in the middle of the face might suggest a nose, but in fact the nostril openings were high on the forehead.

Once, long ago, twenty-seven Cycles to be exact, Captain had sported much the same appearance, but for a younger visage, one which didn't have the skin blemishes or thinning feathers of age. Now, head nearly obscured with implants and altered by surgery, distinctive feathers long lost and skin grayed, neck and areas below encased in black where not outright replaced with mechanical prostheses, Captain was at a loss as to how anyone, even this Breth, could ascertain his original species, much less an identity long lost. It had to be a trick.

{I will destroy that ship,} loudly proclaimed Weapons, bringing a cutting beam to bear.

Returned Captain, {You will not.} A brief struggle ensued over command codes, which Captain handily won. There was a reason he had originally been assigned to the Hierarchy of Eight, and 45 of 300 had not.

Only a few seconds had passed, and it was doubtful any on the captured ships realized the temporary closeness of physical death. Breth continued to stare at the image of Captain, as the latter impassively (at least in outward appearance) gazed back. The weaponry codes were released with the usual admonishment to behave.

"We are not Gerson. That entity is gone. We are the Borg. You will be assimilated," sent Captain through the audio feed with the Collective Voice function set, hoping Breth would take the hint and begin to act as he was supposed to act, with panic.

"No," protested Breth, "no, that is not true. I can see Gerson right on the screen, right there in front of me. He is alive! Come on Gerson, react damn you. It has been over twenty-seven years since your freighter disappeared, but your family never gave up hope. Twenty-five years ago most of the clan escaped before the Borg attacked, taking advice from the entrails reading and bone rolling of Granddad Dreng. It was you Granddad Dreng saw in the censure smoke, you warning us to leave."

Captain decided to ignore the babbling, forging ahead with capture protocols. Although the words of Breth were friendly enough, all four ships held in the tractor beams none-the-less struggled to escape, dashing increasingly frantic phaser and torpedo fire ineffectively against shields.

{Weapons, disable the weaponry on those transports.} The weapon hierarchy suddenly perked up, activating what amounted to overkill. If all the armaments coming on-line were used, only constituent atoms would be left. {NO! I said /disable/! Weapons, think of it as a challenge. Delicate application of force.} Sullen acknowledgment was returned as many of the systems of

destruction powered down. Within a short amount of time, phaser banks and torpedo bays were scarred craters on the hulls of the ships.

On the screen, Breth had been shouting commands as the superstructure of his ship shook under the onslaught. Extinguishers in the background put out small electrical fires as filter system cleared the air of smoke. Satisfied there was nothing species #2553 could do to harm the cube, up to and including suicidal self-destruction of the transports, Captain lowered the shields in preparation to transport an assault and assimilation force.

Breth suddenly looked directly at Captain as someone yelled an unintelligible observation from a still functional display. Returned Breth, "Is the equipment still working? Are the parameters satisfied? Well, activate it then, you numskull!"

Captain felt a slight tingling in his extremities. As he begun to link with local scanners to perform a self-diagnostic which didn't entail going to Doctor, the prickling became more pronounced. The sensation transformed to the familiar one of a transporter beam.

On the screen Breth shouted gleefully, "By the Holy Twins and their Seven Cousins! The machine those scheming Jharin sold us does work! Engage the narrow beam transporter!"

Red swirls surrounded Captain as he felt his molecules disintegrating. Shocked, a room began to shimmer into view before he could trigger Borg transporters, green special effects overpowering to replace the red. The local nodal intersection swam back into sight.

"More power to the transporter! My son's coming home!" came from the direction of the viewscreen as red became the dominant color. Once again, just as Captain was partially rematerialized, the Borg transporters dominated, pulling him back to the cube. Back and forth he bounced, from dim cube interior to bright ship room. Like the old rope from a game of tug-of-war, Captain began to feel frayed, and called for a halt of the contest. The final cycle of transporters left him standing on the deck of Breth's ship, feeling dazed and blinking in confusion. At least all his molecules had made it to the same place.

{Second!} called Captain through the maintained subspace link. {What happened?}

{Working on it. Something has a lock on you, and Sensors isn't sure what it is, but she is looking into it.}

Another voice echoed, {Yes, Sensors is [sight-seeing] into it.}

Although physically separate from Cube #347, Captain retained the same access of the nets he always did. Viewing the ship he was currently marooned in through a constantly changing sensor feed was disconcerting; Captain decided to simply monitor consensus from afar and leave the major tasks to a capable Second. The currently developing situation demanded his full attention.

The room appeared to be a transporter room, as evidenced by the fact Captain found himself standing on a transporter pad commonly associated with species #2553. A control console stood opposite, although no one manned it at the moment. The walls, paneled in red and white, were bare, except for a ceiling-to-floor display of monitors and blinking lights behind the operator's console. An extremely high-pitched hum that was audible only because of Borg implants warned of a force field in operation in the immediate vicinity. Captain stretched out his organic hand, but did not actually touch the field; it would be easily passable. The door slid open.

Three beings of species #2553 entered. The first was Breth, clothed in a drab brown robe which contrasted sharply with the bright tones of his head feathers. Following behind was a female, dressed as Breth, feathers of crown dull orange with a green fringe. Last was an extremely old fellow, naked head showing through feathers so sparse it was not possible to tell their original colors. He wore a black robe with red runes along the hem and a necklace of blue

stones around his neck; he also carried a bulging bag slung over one shoulder. None of the beings were visibly armed.

{I say we flood those ships with the hierarchies of Assimilation and Weapons. What isn't converted can be killed,} sent Second, seeing through Captain's senses. Weapons' mentality glowed with a barely repressed anticipation in the background while Assimilation retained his normal quiet, although the general depression he emitted lightened a bit.

Growled Captain as he let eye and optics rove back and forth to take in as much information as possible, {No. We will wait. Did you not hear? Breth said they had contact with Jharin! There is data here about species #8511; if we learn the knowledge we need is on one of the escaped ships, we may need these sentients /whole/ in order to lay a trap for the others.}

{And if it is here?} asked Second.

{Then we will take these ships.} Captain took a moment to follow the lock on the disabled ship, then set a vector for the impulse engines to overtake the limping vehicle.

{Weapons, CAPTURE that transport. Sensors, any luck on this lock?}

{Sensors does not taste anything yet. The [high treble harmonics] temporarily smelt of [burnt cinnabar], but the [sourness] fled to [sweet] before Sensors could hone in on the identity.}

Captain hated the occasional cryptic sentences of Sensors. Sometimes certain concepts just did not translate, and this was one of those times. There were some thought patterns too alien to adequately render, even for Borg expertise with nearly ten thousand languages. {A simple yes or no will suffice.}

{Sensors says no, but Sensors will continue to examine the [cryptograph].}

The exchanges, including initiation of the course alteration, had required less than ten seconds. In that short time, Breth and his two compatriots had arranged themselves in the transporter room, next to the pad and in a rough semicircle. Of course, there were only so many shapes three beings could make. The black robe stood slightly to the back of the other two.

"Gerson, I'm so sorry we had to steal you away from those others. We know you are not evil, that deep down, despite your outer appearance, you are not a soulless cybernetic monster. Your mother, Rhean, has faith, as does Granddad Dreng." The latter took a maraca? from his bag and began to rhythmically shake it while mumbling untranslatable nothings under his breath. Slowly they became more audible as: "Louie Louie...ooohhh...we gotta go now. Yah, yah, yah, yah...oh, Louie, Louie.... " The shaker drowned the off-tone chant.

{Sensors?} pleaded Captain.

{Sensors still cannot find the [boo-boo]. Give Sensors a little time! If you want [miracles], don't look for them here. You know better.}

Granddad Dreng ground to a halt, then solemnly replaced the maraca in his bag, bringing out a glass globe. As he held it up and closed his eyes, water swirled around a fake snowman while bits of white tumbled in the microcurrents. Both Breth and Rhean had anxious looks on their faces. Pronounced Granddad Dreng, "By the Seven Cousins, I exorcise the demon spirits. By the Holy Twins, I push the evil away. The Sacred Beetles and Joyous Holly will be our guide in the trials to come!" Absolutely nothing happened. Nodding, Granddad Dreng opened his eyes and put the water globe away. "Gerson is definitely there, I can feel it. The Sacred and Joyous Ones have never let this clan down." Breth and Rhean exhaled the breath they had been holding.

{Sensors?????}

{You have odd family, Captain. Really odd. [Calcifying] is the word Sensors wants to use. Your family also has a piece of unknown technology. Sensors thinks you will have to either link with the computers or [creep] the apparatus so that Sensors can understand, and so that we

can devise a countermeasure. The [cinnabar licorice] harmonics say the machine still has a lock on you.}

{Captain,} butted in Weapons, {disabled species #2553 ship captured and armaments disabled.}

Captain set an extremely rude image spinning into the intranet. Dryly commented Second, {Not only is that pict irrelevant, it is quite impossible. Should the Queen get wind of it....} The mock-threat was left hanging.

{Oh, shut up. ALL of you, just shut up,} returned Captain. He returned his full attention to his *shudder* relatives. It was unfortunately impossible to deny the genetic link between himself and them. They were watching him intently.

"This drone no longer is designated Gerson. This body is designated 4 of 8. You will turn off the mechanism which is locking transporters on this drone; you will give up all data related to Jharin; and you will prepare yourselves for assimilation."

"Bah!" spat Granddad Dreng. "You always did take yourself too seriously, boy. Downright anal at times. That cube out there ain't going to miss one little body, and it dang well doesn't need us. You just tell them there people in charge that you got family commitments to attend. 'Bugger off' is the phrase I'd use."

There was obviously a fundamental flaw somewhere, well, many somewheres, about Granddad Dreng's view of the general structure of the Borg. One who knew anything knew that one did not tell the Borg to "Bugger off". Painful memories were flooding back, those which had been very deeply locked away since assimilation. Twenty-seven Cycles ago there had been an impetus for Captain to enlist on the first tramp freighter he could find when he had run away at the barely sublegal age at twenty-three. The fact "Jezebel of the Twins" was a disintegrating lemon which barely eked out a living transporting raw latched guano did not matter. Granddad Dreng had only been a very small part of the reason...there was also his parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles....

"You never could take a hint, Granddad Dreng! No one in this insane asylum of a clan could! Why I had to be born normal is beyond me. The stares, the whispers, the gossip I had to live with as a fledge, but that none on the nest-estate even noticed! The freighter, even though it smelled like sh**, was a dream...even the Borg are preferable. Do you know what one of my thoughts was when I realized my present life was kaput? I was relieved! I knew I would never have to face this clan again.

"I...I...oh, crud." Being faced with his family had brought back all the grievances, all those supposedly purged emotions. Captain, in his supreme exasperation, had fallen from plural to singular during the rant. Silence, both in the immediate room and on the cube.

A single lone voice began to taunt: {Someone is going to be in trouble,} before sliding away.

{Delta,} ordered Captain, {take 438 of 510 and introduce him the direct joys of scrubbing the many kilometers of regeneration system conduits. I know you've been wanting to get that done, but it has been low priority. You now have a drone assigned to the job.}

"Gerson, son! You are back!" cried Rhean with tears in her eyes. Breth also appeared to be quite overcome with emotion. Granddad Dreng just looked smug.

"Now, Gerson, you understand we can't let you out of there until one of the clan physicians is able to examine you, try to cure you. You are not yourself, and who knows how you may react at times. When you are fixed, we will release the transporter lock and get out of

here."

"Breth, you and four of your ships are being held by tractor beams. This cube has a tendency towards a twitchy trigger. I do not wish to have a physician look at me, because nothing is wrong. For once in your life, face reality!"

"Don't take that tone of voice with me, young man!" Granddad Dreng began a high pitched giggle as Breth chided Captain. Cube #347 was having a good floor show, that was for sure. Echoes of {Don't take that tone of voice with me, young man} bounced around. Captain could only grit his teeth.

"I am fifty years old. Fifty. I have long since left the fledge table at the clan dinners. I do not even eat anymore. And I refuse to stay on this transporter pad. I have things to do!" Captain stiffly enunciated every word, then stepped forwards and down. The force field tingled, but was not an impediment. The three took a pace backwards.

Intoned Granddad Dreng solemnly, "Why do birds suddenly appear every time you are near?" The door to the room opened, allowing a new member of species #2553 to enter. This one's head was the reverse coloration of Breth, and wore a red robe. "Praise be, your niece, Dr. Celiat, has arrived. The sacred intonation has proven its worth again."

"But...bu...Breth already said someone was coming." Captain paused, listening to the chorus of voices mimicking Granddad Dreng. {The following designations are also scrubbing the regeneration system conduits. Twice.} A list of fifty-two was compiled and posted. Juggling attention, he returned fully to the local area, "Just get out of my way. I require computer access. I'll find it myself."

Chaos.

Breth: "Son, you will be returned to us. It has been foretold in the boshkah leaves and in the words revealed through the audio reversal of The Village People psalms."

Rhean: "Don't you sass your father!"

Granddad Dreng swinging an amulet with a large yellow circle in the caricature of a face: "May the Seven Cousins have mercy on his soul! He knows not what he does!"

Dr. Celiat waving some medical instrument: "Hold still...hold still! Don't move. No, don't. I need to make some preliminary scans."

Captain felt the distinct urge to a trigger transporter beam, even as Sensors felt the formulating thought and promised it would only lead to a second molecular tug-of-war. Sensors also noted the machine had been located to somewhere at the aft end of the ship, but was obscured by an odd radiation field akin to that found in the nebula, and so could not be pinpointed exactly. Second again proposed dealing with the on-going problems directly.

{No. I don't want any others beamed over here. As long as everyone is on the cube, I know nothing will get out of hand any more than the current potential. Send drones over and we will be stuck with five debris fields, five shiploads of substandard drones - I know my family...the Greater Consciousness would not be pleased - or some combination thereof. Whatever the outcome, the odds are not good we would obtain information on species #8511. I'll deal with the lock.}

Captain looked to each side, then pushed forwards, heading for the door. It did not open. The simple action of smashing the controls located on the right side triggered the opening function. Captain went into a hallway of beige walls with green carpeting, trailed by the four babbling members of his family. He turned what he hoped was aft.

Basic design specs of the transports began to fill Captain's active memory as he accessed little used files. A twisting labyrinth resembling the tunnel motif of a nest-estate, the most

important areas were housed in the central axis, with single/family quarters, food preparation, cargo holds, and other less crucial sections surrounding the core. The original estate designs harkened to the times of pre-space clan warfare, the layout which had been subsequently adapted for domestically produced starships. Unlike many starfaring races, species #2553 did not expose vital nerve centers such as a bridge to the exterior surface where it would be open to a wayward phaser. Captain needed to go deeper into the transport.

Trying to ignore both the continued orders/complaints from the four clan kin and unhelpful snatches of advice from cube members, Captain entered a lift. "Central axis." Amazingly the elevator began to move in the right direction; unfortunately it began to play muzak. The door opened, and Captain strode onto a different ship level, this one of white panels and deep blue carpet.

Dr. Celiat cleared her throat. "Uncle, I see the problem you have. You have lots of nonorganic parts attached to you, and multitudes of foreign particles in your blood. If you come with me, I'll see what I can do to alleviate what must be excruciating pain."

"Amazing deduction. I've lived with the condition for longer than you probably have been alive. My 'foreign particles' have long since deadened pain nerve endings such that those sensations are irrelevant." Captain was reading the writing helpfully stenciled on the doors. The entourage had gained several more people, mostly children in shorts.

Granddad Dreng snorted, "Now don't you talk to Celiat like that. It took her many years of hard study to be the clan doctor. You give her..." he bobbed his head up and down several times, finding a beat, "you give her...R-E-S-P-E-C-T, this is what it means to me. R-E-S-P-E-C-T...." Further singing was ignored as Captain abruptly halted in front of a particular door.

"Heritage of the Holy Teachings? Don't tell me you actually...." The faint sound of a chorus could be heard, along with muffled thumps. The sound had to be extremely loud, by the very fact it could be perceived in the hallway through supposed soundproof doors. Captain had to see for himself.

Many of the ship's fledges sat, heads bowed. Somewhere in the background heavy thumping began to emanate once more, quickly followed by electric wailings. "GALILEO!" shouted all those present, then began to bang their heads against air, feathers flying all over the place. Granddad Dreng agilely scooted by the stunned roadblock to cavort about the room. As suddenly as the music? had started, it stopped. The room was silent, then a single voice:

"Nah, nah, nah, nah...nah, nah, nah, nah...hey, heeey, goooodbye. Nah, nah, nah, nah...nah, nah, nah, nah...hey, heeey, goooodbye...." One of the older children stood to lift her voice in sweet praise to the Gods.

The teaching shrine, for that was the purpose of the immense oval room, had been the focal point of the clan in the nest-estate. Displayed on wall shelves and in glass-fronted cases, the wholly unique religion of Clan Dreng was laid out for all to see.

Over four hundred homeworld years ago, according to legend, the founder of the clan, Juruvi Dreng, a salvage/claim-jumper of the then newly spacefaring race, was operating in the frontiers of the home system's inner asteroid belt. An accident occurred which should have ended his life, but he managed to make it to a mysterious tumbling container, one which had appeared before his eyes in a flash of heavenly light. It was obvious to Juruvi Dreng that the Holy Ones had wanted him to live and spread the word about their true nature. The relics found within the container were concrete proof of their existence, complete with a machine which translated the language of heaven into that of the mortal realms. Unfortunately, when very few were willing to abandon five millennium of accepted doctrine preaching peaceful worship of the Twins and

Cousins, Juruvi had been forced to begin his own clan.

As this was the lead of the Dreng clan convoy transports, than it stood to reason these things were the original artifacts, with the other ships holding blessed copies. Captain automatically lifted his attention to the one relic which had always caught his attention as a fledge, the one which now held new meaning from the Borg perspective of assimilated languages, including those which originated on the Federation capital of Terra. A large piece of plasticized paper housed in a xenon-atmosphere display read:

"Property of the Florence auction house, station Rhone. The estate of Jerry Wilkins wills that this collection of twentieth century American music art and cultural icons to be sold on June 13, 2325, and the proceeds bequeathed to the Federation Smithsonian Institutes. The inventory is listed in the succeeding sheets."

Captain backed out of the room. What he was looking for was not there, but the sidetrip did confirm imperfectly recalled pre-assimilation memories. The pseudoreligion was bogus! Granddad Dreng rejoined the now silent group as it followed Captain down the hallway.

"Does it bring back memories, son? Does basking in the light and sounds of the Holy Ones bring your true self forward? Are you ready to return to your clan?"

"Breth, I always thought the religion seemed odd when I was a fledge. Now I know...the Dreng founder, through a freak accident, found a collection of mundane Federation memorabilia. A temporal-spatial anomaly and a lost container of irrelevant junk, not holy anythings, is the base for four hundred years of insular insanity!"

Silence...deeply disturbing silence greeted the remark as Captain continued down the hall, looking for a central computer area. Perhaps he should have tried the engineering section near the engines? Captain, suddenly realizing that he was now unaccompanied, turned.

Granddad Dreng, Breth, Rhean, and Dr. Celiat were staring at Captain, mouths open in disbelief. The three younger clan members turned to the eldest, eyes wide and searching for reassurance. Tears welled up in Celiat's eyes as she shakily asked, "Granddad Dreng, say it is not so! Say it is not so!!" She clutched the medical instrument to her chest like a security blanket.

Meanwhile, Granddad Dreng was slowly turning red. Nearly bald skin took on the dull hue of anger. He reached into his bag and retrieved a pair of rose-colored glasses, putting them on. Although he had no ears to secure what was a human invention, a slightly wider head combined with the bump in the middle of his face kept the glasses in place.

"Heretic! I did not wish to test you with the demon finder, but you have given me no choice! We thought there was still some of Gerson left in his body, an ember of his personality which could be fanned back to flaming life! But it is true...the warning Gerson gave this clan twenty-five years ago was his soul, struggling to make amends with his family. The Gerson that fledged in the nest-estate would never had made such a pronouncement. Gerson is dead and the Borg demon has taken his place!"

Breth was obviously trying not to break into tears himself, but it was difficult as Rhean had followed Dr. Celiat's example. Finally he simply said, "I am sorry, but Granddad Dreng is right. You are not my son, not anymore, although you wear his body. I am ashamed." Breth gathered the two females in his arms, then turned pointedly away.

Captain felt the overwhelming urge to find a chair, sit in it, and rock back and forth with his hands over his face to hide maniacal laughter. It was a passing urge, however, irrelevant in part because no longer felt comfortable in any position except standing, and in the fact he no longer had two whole upper limbs. Exasperation. Pure exasperation. He turned away to continue down the hallway as Granddad Dreng began yet another slow chant, a funeral dirge,

"Lucy in the sky with diamonds..."

An announcement swept over the intercom. Acknowledging the danger the five ships were in, Breth was only now formally informing the clan of the threat the Borg served, and to be not fooled by the fact the current drone on the ship was once a member of the family. "A demon is among us" was the exact phrase used. The hallways became vacant and silent, other than the continuing presence of Granddad Dreng and his solemn pronouncements.

{Sensors? Is the lock gone now?}

{Nope. Sensors thinks your family, in their rush, forgot to [implode] whatever machine they used to [shuffle] you in the first place.} Sensors went on to detail an effective countermeasure, but it would need for Captain to be fully materialized on the cube. Unfortunately, there was a good chance the transport's transporter was directly tied into the machine and would activate for another tugging session if the cube attempted to beam him home.

Second asked, {Now can we put drones aboard?}

{No. They will probably start to smash everything if others come aboard, including important data about species #8511, now that Breth had finally declared us hostile.}

The twisting maze of hallways terminated with a single door marked "Computer Core." Finally. By the perversity of the universe, it was the absolutely last egress, other than a lift, in the central axis. As Captain smashed the control to the recalcitrant door in order to open it he noticed Granddad Dreng had at long last gone silent. It was a relief. The phaser which grazed a shoulder was unexpected only in that it had taken so long for resistance to materialize.

"Kill the possessed!" screamed Granddad Dreng. Captain glanced back, only to see the elder had pulled a weapon from his bag. Eyes glittered in religious fervor behind the rose lens. "Die!" The trigger was depressed.

Although a lance of energy did hit Captain, the blast simply splashed off personal shielding. It seemed species #2553, at least this group, had never bought new weapons or readjusted the frequencies on the old; Borg were long since immune to the effects. Captain turned away, wincing as a shot from inside the room was stopped mere centimeters from his face.

The room's interior was packed with computer equipment, a brightly lit room of monitors and blinking lights. Three technicians, each with a different bicolor scheme of cranial feathers, crouched behind plush swivel chairs with castors on the legs. Two were armed, while the third nervously hid in a corner, spinning his barrier around.

The two armed technicians pulled their chairs sideways, wheels squeaking. As they did so, both fired their weapons. One missed, the other hit with ineffective force. Granddad Dreng yelled "Die!" from behind just as Captain felt another phaser from that quarter.

Ignoring the light show, Captain panned around the room, looking for something which did not belong. There, in the back...part of a console had a new look to it, accented by the fact part of the wrapping plastic had yet to be torn off a panel of dark buttons. Writing next to various LCD displays did not belong to species #2553, although the words on the associated monitor did match appropriately. That piece of computer equipment was the goal.

Captain strode to the back of the core room, passing within touching distance of the unarmed technician. The poor fellow gave an eek as he scuttled backwards, pinning himself against the back wall while attempting to look as small and inoffensive as possible behind his chair. Three more phaser hits were deflected.

"Will you knock it off?" bellowed Captain. "That is very annoying!" Granddad Dreng's voice rose in a rallying hymn against darkness entitled "Leader of the Band", which the other two

weapon wielders joined. The third continued to shiver, praying for The King's protection. With the blindness of the true fanatic, Granddad Dreng continued his assault. "If you even think about calling on that no-name horse, I /will/ pull this ship down around your ears. I /never/ liked that song...it made absolutely no sense in any context."

The consoles to either side spat sparks as errant phaser fire destroyed hardware. Captain carefully examined the piece of alien equipment, deciding it was more or less self-contained. He began to mentally scroll through the ship inventory at high speed, zeroing in on the tool he wanted. Although Captain was still personally denied the transporter, he could beam items to himself. The arc welder which materialized in his hand he quickly fitted into a socket on his prosthesis.

A torrent of sparks flew as Captain narrowed his eye and worked on cutting the species #8511 hardware out of the main equipment bank. It was quickly severed; and as Sensors called that the lock was terminated, Captain sent the console to the cube. Next task...

The one-sided phaser fight stopped and a flurry of whispers over the ineffectiveness began. Although Granddad Dreng argued for a renewed attempt to disintegrate the demon impostor, one of the technicians was pointing out the present try was damaging vital computer components, as well as scaring Vren near to death with misses scorching his chair. No conclusions were made, but one of the techs did go running out of the room and down the hallway, calling for heavier weaponry. Granddad Dreng shouted for someone to bring forth the powerful lava lamp artifact with an appropriate power source.

Captain eyed a mostly intact terminal: it would have to do. He slammed his hand down and swiftly made contact with the ship computer, funneling the computational powers of his sub-collective into finding information of species #8511, specifically where the transporter lock technology had been acquired. The dataspace of the ship quickly transmuted to digital rubble and chaos, no system left unturned in the pillage. Lights flickered, doors opened and closed without reason, and life support erratically functioned. Gravity was momentarily lost, dropping most people to the ground when it came back on-line.

"We got it!" said Captain aloud, voicing the completion of the primary mission by the sub-collective. He could feel several mentalities, especially those few which were once human or associated with the Federation, swipe selections from the teaching archives as contact with the now lobotomized computer was terminated. Captain turned to regard the cursing Granddad Dreng as he pulled himself to his feet with the dubious help of a freely rolling chair.

"Granddad Dreng, I always wanted to tell you but never had the guts: your singing really, really sucks." The squawk of offense was punctuated by a phaser blast which was too little too late as Captain triggered transporters on Cube #347 to beam him back to his nodal intersection, back to his family and home.

The five ships of the convoy were allowed to go free, tractor beams abruptly shutting off. As the cube distanced itself from the transports at high impulse, Captain began the construction of the weekly status report to the Greater Consciousness. The fact the ships contained Captain's kin had absolutely nothing to do with the consensus reached to neither destroy nor assimilate those onboard. Assimilation? Perfection was the Collective goal; Granddad Dreng and company were as far from perfection as possible. Destruction? Species #8511 was now known to occasionally trade with other species at a newly revealed location, but a possible contact to follow-up in the far, far future had to be preserved just in case all other ways led to dead-ends.

Despite Captain's strenuous self-objection, there was perhaps a piece of the Dreng clan in

him, a denied legacy of hundreds of years of genetic inbreeding which left no descendent unscathed. Or, maybe, it was a bit of borrowed sarcastic perversity more suited to Second's nature. Whatever the reason, Captain impulsively threw a tight-beamed subspace broadcast towards the five ships being rapidly outdistanced,

"Nah, nah, nah, nah...nah, nah, nah, nah...hey, heeeey, goooodbye...."